

21ST CENTURY MONTGOMERY GI BILL ENHANCEMENT ACT

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I regret that I am unable to be there to do so in person.

In his second inaugural address in 1865, President Lincoln called upon Congress “to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” Over the years Congress has responded.

The GI Bill of Rights was officially called the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944. The Congress recognized the difficulties that servicemen had at the conclusion of World War I. The bill was put in place to assist the large number of World War II veterans who were returning to civilian life. It was intended to ease their transition. The GI Bill, rather than become a pension bill like those after previous wars, actually made the veterans less dependent on government. The bill turned the college experience from an elitist opportunity for the few to an opportunity for all Americans. It was a fulfillment of the American dream and a way for a grateful nation to pay back the patriots who had marched into harm’s way and saved the world. The GI Bill produced doctors, nurses, lawyers, scholars, engineers, architects and successful entrepreneurs. These returning veterans set about transforming America into a true land of opportunity.

As you know, the cost of education has escalated. Today many of our veterans must devote many hours to part-time jobs in order to supplement their tuition. We must increase the VA payments so that our veterans will not lose their motivation and can rapidly complete their degree or training and move into the full-time workforce. The proposed increases in monthly benefit payments over the next three years will make significant and important progress toward restoring the GI Bill to fulfill the promise of an education to eligible Tennessee veterans. However, Congress must ensure that the GI Bill continues to keep pace with the costs of higher education so that repeated efforts to restore the benefits to adequate levels are not necessary. The bill should also allow benefit payments for emerging professional and technical training leading to certification and licensure.

In Tennessee, the Volunteer State, the home of World War I hero Alvin York, we have prospered because of the skills and the work ethic of our World War II heroes. We also have benefited greatly from the educational opportunities provided to veterans of the Korean War, Vietnam and Desert Storm. Over the last six years, Tennessee veterans have received \$107 million in GI Bill benefits.

Tennessee Public Chapter 767, enacted last year, provides certain supplementary education benefits for veterans and certain veterans’ dependents. Essentially, the new law provides for an education through a baccalaureate degree for the dependents of veterans who make the ultimate sacrifice. The major provision of the Act established the “Certain Veterans’ Dependents Education Benefit Program.” Under this program, every dependent child in the state under the age of 21 that meets certain criteria is entitled to a waiver of tuition, or maintenance fees, and shall be admitted without cost to any of the institutions of higher education owned, operated and maintained by the state.

Those criteria are: the child’s father or mother was killed or died as a direct result of injuries received; has been officially reported as being a prisoner of war or missing in action while serving honorably as a member of the United States armed forces during a qualifying period of military conflict; or the spouse of such veteran,

The second provision of the Act established the “Student Veterans’ & Dependents’ Tuition & Fee Payment Deferment Program. Any student with eligibility to any of the education benefit programs of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) and other certain military related education benefits, may be granted a deferment of the payment of their tuition and fees at public educational institutions until the end of the term. Under certain circumstances, the law permits deferments into the

next term. This state law provides flexible billing that is compatible with the VA payment schedule.

I am pleased to report we are close to the establishment of a new state National Guard tuition-assistance program for members of the Tennessee National Guard. I support the pending state legislation entitled the "*Tennessee National Guard Tuition Assistance Act*," and, in anticipation of its passage this year, I have authorized \$250,000 in my proposed state budget for startup of the program. The Tennessee National Guard experiences the same recruiting and retention issues as the United States Department of Defense. Under this program, the state will pay for the cost of tuition at public higher education institutions or provide the equivalent amount to students desiring to attend private education institutions. I view this program as providing professional development for members of our National Guard and consistent with the higher education and economic goals of the state.

Today at Fort Campbell, the home of the famous 101st Airborne Division, the 160 Special Aviation and 5th Special Forces, we are transitioning soldiers into the job market in Tennessee. Many take advantage of the GI Bill at our State universities. They are excellent, highly motivated students. Each year many move on from their education experiences to productive lives in the Tennessee workforce.

Mr. Chairman, today America has a very generous college loan and grant program to help our citizens obtain college degrees. That degree is the key to a successful and productive life. Surely those who stand ready to march into harm's way in the defense of freedom deserve the opportunity and success that come with a college degree.

Mr. Chairman, I urge immediate passage of the 21st Century Montgomery GI Bill Enhancement Act, which is most appropriately named for my dear friend and former colleague, the Honorable Sonny Montgomery. Mr. Chairman, thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before your committee today. I wish you all the best in assuring this legislation becomes a reality.